





NOTES  
ON THE  
MEDIÆVAL LEPPER HOSPITALS  
OF  
IRELAND.

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AMONG the many contributions to antiquarian lore of that eminent member of our own profession, Sir James Young Simpson, few are more interesting than his learned papers entitled "Antiquarian Notices of Leprosy and Leper Hospitals in Scotland and England."<sup>a</sup> As regards Ireland, however, I am not aware that there is any published account of Mediæval Leper Houses; and I have here attempted to collect a few "*disjecta membra*" to supply to some extent this historical want, until some one better qualified than I am, can give as full a history of our Leper or Lazar Houses as Sir James Simpson has given of those of England and Scotland.

The following is a short summary of the facts collected by Sir James Simpson regarding the extent and constitution of these hospitals, and I give it here because it applies equally to those of our own country, which, like all others, were founded on an ecclesiastical basis.<sup>b</sup>

From information collected by Sir James Simpson from English and Scottish MSS. and records—from *Dugdale's Monasticon Anglicanum*, *Semler's Historiæ Ecclesiasticæ Selecta Capita*, *Schilling's Commentio de Leprâ*, and other authorities—we learn that a disease, popularly known as leprosy, was everywhere endemic from the tenth to the sixteenth century, and that against it princes and courts enacted laws and popes issued bulls, particularly Alexander III., who issued a famous bull—"De Leprosis"—regarding the ecclesiastical separation and the rights of the infected. A particular order of knighthood, that of St. Lazarus, was instituted to care for the sick, particularly lepers, one of whom

<sup>a</sup> Edin. Med. and Surg. Journ., Vols. lvi. and lvii.

<sup>b</sup> Taken from my Edition of Neligan on Diseases of the Skin. Dublin, 1866. Pp. 315, &c.

they had had to elect as their master, until countermanded by Pope Innocent IV. They separated from the Knights Hospitallers about the twelfth century.

In the middle ages leper hospitals were common everywhere. In 1226 there were 2,000 of them in France, limited as its territorial extent then was, while in England they were numerous and wealthy. They were receptacles for infected persons—not medical institutions, because the disease was considered incurable—and were mostly religious establishments, under the sway of some neighbouring abbey. By papal order they all had chapels and ecclesiasties. Thus, in the leper hospital of St. Giles, at Norwich, there were a prior, eight canons regular, two clerks, seven choristers, and two sisters, to minister to the wants of eight bed-ridden lepers. At Illeford, in Essex, they had very hard religious duties, no end of prayers occupying them from early morn till near midnight; and at St. Julian's, at Saint Alban's, Abbot Michael made some very significant rules "*de accessu mulierum*." From the extant laws of Sherburne Hospital it seems that refractory lepers were occasionally chastised with the birch, "*modo scholarium*." The lepers had abundant and good diet and clothing; and, from some extracts from MS. diet rolls and clothing lists of the leper houses, it would seem that not only were all their wants provided for, but that sanitary rules of the best kind prevailed among them. They were often regarded as objects of compassion, and yet were often persecuted. Thus kings and queens used to visit them, wash, and sometimes kiss them, to exhibit pious humility; while, on the other hand, Philip V. and Charles VI. of France enrolled themselves among scoundrels of the first water by burning these poor wretches alive, to grasp their hospital endowments. Sir James Simpson proves that this disease existed in Europe before the Crusades, and was not brought to England by the returning warriors, as is generally supposed, since leper houses existed in various places long before the occurrence of the first crusade of Peter the Hermit. The largest leper hospital in England was at Sherburne, near Durham, and was built by Bishop Pudsey in 1181. In the sixteenth century, when this disease had nearly disappeared, secondary cases of the then new disease—syphilis—were largely admitted to the leper hospitals, which at that period were almost empty. In Scotland the lepers used a rattle to warn persons of their approach, and some similar usage prevailed in Italy. By English law they were classed as idiots, or insane, were counted dead, and could not inherit. The



church performed burial rites over a leper on his admission to hospital; he was clothed, and in every respect treated as a corpse in *foro ecclesiæ*. In France, until lately, the rituals retained the offices for the separation of the leper from the living. They appear to have been most touching, and must have been heartrending to the miserable outcast. They were concluded by the significant act of throwing a shovelful of earth on the leper.

Although Sir James Simpson refers to *Ledwich's Antiquities of Ireland*, as giving information respecting leper houses in this country, I have not found account of any such; all Ledwich says is that the ancient Irish were subject to leprosy; contracted, according to general opinion, from their constant use of raw meat; and that *aqua vitæ*, or whiskey, was held in great repute among them as an unfailing specific for its cure. Hence, perhaps, the national attachment of our countrymen to that useful medicine.

So far as I have been able to ascertain, the Irish houses of any note were Anglican foundations; but frequent mention of the disease is made in ancient records. In these records the term leprosy seems to have indicated merely cutaneous disease, and not any particular kind or variety. Thus, for example, small-pox is spoken of as leprosy.

(From Report on Table of Deaths—Census of Ireland, 1851.)

The first notice of leprosy in Ireland occurs in *Colgan's Acta Sanctorum*, from which it appears that, A.D. 432, "St. Patrick maintains a certain leper in his house, and washes his sores with his own hands."

A.D. 546, "Nessan, a leper, died."—*Annals of Innisfallen*.

A.D. 551. "St. Nessan, the leper [*Lobhar*], died."—*Annals of the Four Masters*.

A.D. 555. "Nassan, the leper, died."—*Annals of Clonmacnoise*.

A.D. 550. "The pestilence, which is called *samtrusg*, the mange, scurvy, or leprosy, raged this year."—*Chronicon Scotorum*.

Numerous entries of this kind occur showing the recognized existence of some disease or diseases called leprosy. Soon after the first Danish invasion, A.D. 835, we thus find the first mention of a leper hospital in the *Annals of Innisfallen*, under date A.D. 869—"Devastation of Armagh by Arlaf, so that the city was burned with its houses and hospitals [*nosocomiis*, or leper houses.]"

From *Archdall's Monasticon Hibernicum* it appears that the monastic leper houses commenced very soon after the Anglo-Norman invasion. In A.D. 1185, a leper-house which had pre-

viously been established at Waterford, was confirmed to the poor through the Benedictines; and in 1192, another was erected at Kilbrixy, County Westmeath, and dedicated to St. Bridget. In 1344, the Hospital of St. Stephen was erected in Dublin on the site at present occupied by Mereer's Hospital, where the cemetery still exists. The present St. Stephen's Church, in Upper Mount-street, is the successor of the parish church of St. Stephen, which in turn was the successor of the hospital and hospital church, suppressed at the general dissolution of religious houses in the reign of Henry VIII.

There were beyond doubt many more leper houses in Dublin; but, strange to say, all records of them seem to have perished, while preserved in other places of lesser note. One stood on the rising ground north of Townsend-street, formerly called Lazar's Hill; and in this locality, tradition says, many miraculous cures of lepers were performed.

This hospital seems to have been the same as "The Steyne Hospital, founded by Archbishop de Loundres, about the year 1220, in the district of Le Steyne, or the Stane, otherwise called Lazar's Hill, or Lazie Hill, about where Townsend-street is now."—(*History of Mercer's Hospital*, by Horatio Townsend, Esq. Dublin: G. Herbert, 1860.)

According to the Rev. Dr. Reeves, who gives it on the authority of the *Repertorium viride*, a statement of the Dublin churches, written by Archbishop Alan, in 1523, St. Stephen's was a leper hospital; and Dr. Reeves further remarks that the church of Ballyloucher, or Ballylower, near Kilgobban, was a dependency of St. Stephen's hospital—(*Calend. Cancell.* p. 157, n. 69); and that the Irish word Ballylower signifies Leperstown, which has been corrupted into Leopardstown. This statement as to St. Stephen's hospital is corroborated by the following, extracted by Whitelaw (*Hist. of Dublin*, Vol. i., p. 391), and supposed to be dated about 1360 or 1370:—

"A gift from Ellena Multon to God and the Blessed Virgin, and St. Stephen, the proto-martyr, and to the poor lepers of the city of Dublin, resident therein, of two acres of ground whereon stood the chapel of St. Stephen, near Dublin, with a small meadow called — Mary's, to the east of the said chapel, to hold in perpetual charity for the support of the said poor for ever."

In the year 1408, reign of Henry IV., there was a leper house near Wexford, for Archdall says (p. 759):—"King Henry IV., on



the 26th of January, 1408, and 10th year of his reign, granted to the son of William Rochford, during life, the custody of the hospital for lepers, under the invocation of the brethren and sisters of St. Mary Magdalen, near Wexford, with the lands, rents, possessions, churches, tithes, &c., therunto belonging, the said John to support the houses, buildings, &c., and to defray all other expenses at his own proper cost." And respecting others, "in the early editions of *Ware's Antiquities of Ireland* (although not in the ordinary authorities), we read that after Hore Abbey, founded for Cistercians, by David MacCarwil, Archbishop of Cashel, in 1272, was erected, the hospital built by David de Latimer for lepers, b united to this abbey." In or about 1376, "we read in *Whitelaw and Walsh's History of Dublin*, of a grant to the poor lepers of the city of Dublin;" and in 1421, we find another notice of "the leprous house of St. Stephen, near Dublin."—(*Report on Tables of Deaths*, p. 91.)

In 1467, Archdall says, "a hospital for lepers was founded under the invocation of St. Bridgid, at the village of Hospital," in the county of Limerick; and about the same time, says Sir W. Wilde, a similar institution was built and endowed at Dungannon, in the county Tyrone.—(*Report on Table of Deaths*, p. 94.)

Previous to the time of Henry VIII., there was a leper house in Galway, for in the life of Bishop Kirwan (Meehan's translation), quoted by Sir W. Wilde, we read that: "in 1543, in the eastern suburb of Galway, stood the building of St. Bridgid's church, a long time inhabited as a lazaret house; this place, almost destroyed within our own recollection, did he [Bishop Kirwan] re-erect in 1648."—*Report on Tables of Deaths*, p. 108. "And he laid, too, the foundations of the church sacred to St. Bridgid, which the lepers were wont to frequent for hearing mass."

In *Hardiman's History of Galway* an assertion is made (regarding this hospital), respecting the mode of its support, which is of some interest. It is professedly taken from the "*Town Annals*," which Sir W. Wilde states are not now accessible; it reads thus:—

"St. Bridget's hospital, in the town of Galway, was founded for the poor of the town, and each burgess was obliged in his turn to send a servant to collect alms every Sabbath day for its support—a custom which was long after observed. This charitable institution was fortunately completed in the year 1543, when the Sweating Sickness broke out, and raged with great violence, destroying multitudes of the natives, and particularly the tradesmen of the town."

At Dungarvan, says Archdall, "an hospital for lepers was built here and endowed under the invocation of St. Bridgid, but we know nothing further of it."—P. 689.

Of the leper-house at Hospital, near Lismore, the date of the foundation of which I have already noted, we know nothing more than is told us by Archdall (p. 694), who says, "an hospital for lepers was founded here under the invocation of St. Bridgid, to which several lands did belong, as appears from a registry compiled sometime after 1467, when the master of the hospital, styled Prior of Lismore, was in his 120th year. At the time of the general suppression, these lands were unknown."

Mention has been made of the Waterford Leper Hospital, and more than mere mention ought to be made of it, because it is the only one actually remaining in use, and bearing its original name at the present day. It was, according to tradition, founded by King John, and was endowed for lepers by the Power family. "This hospital (observes Archdall) must have been erected before the Benedictine abbey (in Waterford), for John, Earl of Morton, in his charter to that abbey, confirmed the leper house to the poor of the city."

In *Smith's County History of Waterford*, written before 1745, the following account is given of this institution:—

"The Leper House or Hospital of St. Stephen, in this city, situated in St. Stephen-street, was first endowed by the family of the Powers, with the lands called Leperstown, in the parish of Killea, about five miles from this town; they are set by the master of the hospital, who is appointed during pleasure by the Mayor, Sheriffs, and Commons, at a small salary, and has a clerk as an assistant. It is also endowed with other lands and tenements in and about the city. Formerly about fifty poor used to receive a yearly allowance by the master's hands. But as it was thought that a publick infirmary would best answer the intent of the pious benefactors, since the leprosy is not a disease now much complained of, it has been thought proper to endow an infirmary for the reception of such sick and wounded poor as shall offer themselves to the attending physician or surgeon to be cured. There are at present (1745) two houses fitted up with beds and other accommodations for forty sick; one of these houses is endowed by the Earl of Tyrone, who is possessed of the estate of the founders in this county, by a fund of £3,110, put to interest at 5 per cent. for this purpose, the house being given by the city. As these houses are

contiguous, the same persons attend both. The physician attends gratis, and the surgeon has a salary from the city of £30 per annum, and £20 from Lord Tyrone. There is one housekeeper at £6 per annum, and four nurses at forty shillings per annum each. Out of the remainder of the leper fund the Corporation gives £100 a year to decayed housekeepers." I suppose the funds of this hospital are still fairly applied, and have neither been confiscated nor jobbed away. In these days when our legislators assume to tear up our ancient landmarks, to alter men's wills, and dispose of their property very differently from the intentions of the testators, it is refreshing to find in Ireland at least *one* ancient remnant of the true Christian charity of past ages, which has survived the attacks of the legal robber and the unholy usurper. The last recorded case of a leper in this hospital, or, indeed, in this country, occurred in 1775; but should any disease of this kind—as it may—become again prevalent in Ireland, the citizens of Waterford will have no occasion to found an hospital for its treatment. Whatever may have become of the endowment of these houses, their own disappearance is thus accounted for in Dr. Gerard Boate's well-known *Natural History of Ireland*, first published in 1652 (p. 184):—"The rickets are of late very rife in Ireland, where few years agoe unknown; so on the contrary it hath been almost quite freed from another disease, one of the very worst and miserablest in the world, namely, the leprosie, which in former times used to be very common there, especially in the province of Munster; the which therefore was filled with hospitals, expressly built for to receive and keep the leprous persons. But many years since Ireland hath been almost quite freed from this horrible and loathesome disease, and as few leprous persons are found there as in any other countrie in the world; so that the hospitals erected for their use, having stood empty a long time, are quite decayed and come to nothing!" Dr. Boate proceeds to account for the disappearance of the disease, which he thinks was "merely through the fault and foul gluttony of the inhabitants in the excessive devouring of unwholesome salmon," and states that the English at an early period made severe laws against taking salmon out of season, and so caused the disease to disappear.

As regards the house at Kilbixy, the foundation of which has been already noted, all we can gather is taken from Archdall, who says (p. 720):—"This ancient town, in the barony of Moygoish, and about a mile west of Iristemagh, was adorned with a castle, erected by Hugh de Laeie in 1192, and a monastic edifice, or rather



an hospital, built for the support of lepers, and hence it acquired the appellation of the Leper House of St. Brigid."

In the County of Down there were formerly leper houses at Downpatrick and at Kilclief. Of the former Archdall says (p. 118) this hospital was dedicated to St. Nicholas, and, with the hospital of St. Peter at Kilclief, was, on the 20th April, 1413, granted in custodium to John Young, John Molyn, and Walter Celey, with all their lands, tenements and appurtenances, being then in the King's hands for certain causes; to hold the same as long as they should continue in his Majesty's possession.

There was formerly a "Leper's Old Hospital of St. Stephen's" in Cork. It was governed by a prior; and later (temp. Ric. II., and Hen. IV.) by a guardian appointed by the King. It gave place to the parish church of St. Stephen, to which was attached, as an endowment, the landed property of the leper hospital. This parish, with some others, was ultimately incorporated into the union, now known as St. Nicholas's, while Baron Worth's Blue Coat Hospital was built on the site of the church. It is still known as St. Stephen's Hospital.—*Caulfield's Sigilla Ecclesiæ Hibernicæ Illustrata*, pp. 28, 29.

There is much information about the original lands of this hospital, and of those subsequently given to it by Baron Worth, in *Smith's History of the County and City of Cork*, Vol. i. (2nd ed. 1774), pp. 383, &c. The processes of spoliation and family jobbery are splendidly exemplified by the present condition of this institution, which, thanks to the good old system of trustees for corporate property giving perpetual leases at nominal rents to their own friends, enjoys at present only a small part of the revenues which Baron Worth left to it in addition to the leper hospital property.

For the preceding information as regards Cork I am indebted to my learned friend Richard Caulfield, Esq., LL.D., F.S.A., the well-known antiquary, who has also supplied me with further notes respecting leper houses in his native city and county. In a letter to me he says:—"I have just alighted on an abstract of the will of John de Wynehedon, citizen of Cork, executed the Octave of the Apostles Peter and Paul, 1306. This is probably one of the oldest Anglo-Irish wills extant. It is amongst the Rothe MSS. in the British Museum. He orders his body to be buried with the Friars of the order of the blessed Augustine of Cork [now called the Red Abbey]. He leaves 200lbs. of wax to be put on the linen to cover his body; [amongst his bequests] 'to the lepers of St. Stephen's, of

St. Mary Magdalen of Shandon; to the lepers near the bridge opposite the Friar preachers [St. Dominick's Abbey, where the mill now is, near the late Cathedral]; to the lepers of Glenamir [Glanmire], and to other houses."

In the Pipe Roll of Cloyne, which Dr. Caulfield edited some time ago, the following passage occurs:—

"Leprosi de Clone tenent de domino [that is the Bishop], ac rem terræ ubi capella sancti Michælis est et tenent per servitium iid. per annum, et per servitia fidelitatis, communis sectæ curiæ."

"The Church of St. Brandon [in Cork] stood on the north side of the river, on one side of the road leading to Youghal, where there is still [says Smith in 1749] a burial ground. The tythes, and a considerable part of the lands of this parish, were formerly appropriated to the maintenance of a leper house."—Smith's *op. cit.*, Vol. i., p. 381. Among the relics, which, Archdall [p. 170] says, "were religiously preserved" in Christ Church in this city, was "St. Patrick's high altar of marble, on which a leper was miraculously carried from Great Britain to Ireland."

I have now endeavoured to record and note on the existence of leper hospitals as follows:—

Armagh.

St. Stephen's, Waterford.

St. Bridgid's, Kilbixy, Westmeath.

St. Stephen's, Dublin.

Lazar's Hill, Dublin.

St. Mary Magdalen's, Wexford.

David le Latimer's Hospital, attached to Hore Abbey—a Cistercian foundation.

St. Bridgid's, at "Hospital," Lismore.

Dungannon, County Tyrone.

[This Sir William Wilde mentions, apparently on authority of Archdall; but I do not find any note of it in his *Monasticon*.]

St. Bridgid's, Galway.

Dungarvan, County Waterford.

St. Nicholas's, Downpatrick.

St. Peter's, Kilclief, County Down.

St. Stephen's.

St. Mary Magdalene's.

St. Dominick's, and

St. Brandon's, Cork, and one more at Cloyne.



Further researches will probably largely increase this list; and gain information as to the property and discipline of these institutions. Perhaps I should add to it that "In the *Annals of Kilronan*, and of the *Four Masters*, under the date A.D. 1232, we find recorded the death of 'Fachtna O'Halghaith,' Comharb [Vicar] of Drom Muchada, Drumacoo, and official of Ni Fiachrath [the Diocese of Kilmacduagh], a man who kept a house [of entertainment] for strangers, lepers, and for learning and instruction." This is one of the earliest accounts by a contemporaneous writer of an Irish Hospital in Christian times."—(*Wilde, Report on Tables of Deaths*, page 24.) The late eminent Dr. O'Donovan stated that a branch of this "O'Halghath" were also hereditary physicians, and a fragment of a MS. which once belonged to them is still in existence. The name is now Anglicised "O'Halley." The celebrated astronomer, Edmund Halley (ob. 1742), was of this family, as also was the learned Dr. Darbey Halley, Roman Catholic P.P. of Dungarvan, Ardfinan, county Tipperary, who died in 1628.

Long prior to the introduction of Christianity into Ireland, when the regal palaces of Tara and Emania existed, there was attached to the latter "the House of the Crimson Branch," where the warriors of old hung up their arms and trophies, and near to this stood the *Broin Bearg* (or "House of Sorrow") where the diseased and wounded were cared for.—(*Wilde's Report on the Status of Disease, Census*, 1851, page 89.) From the twelfth century to the Reformation, the care of the sick, poor and needy was confided to the monastic orders, who seem to have done their work well, according to the ideas and knowledge of their own times. In Dublin we had general hospitals belonging to the Priory of St. John the Baptist, in Thomas-street, with 50 beds, the Steyne, already noticed, Allen's Hospital, the Priory of Kilmainham, and probably others. But all these were suppressed at the time of the Reformation; their revenues were given to greedy courtiers, and their records perished. The clumsy, tax-imposing legislation of our own day is vainly endeavouring to make good to our sick and our poor what the unscrupulous plunderers of a past age selfishly deprived them of. In the sister country St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas's Hospitals, and a few others, are the only remnants of that true charity for our poor and sick brethren, which the original donors never intended to be used for the foundation of a set of selfish nobles.



